WCM residents air concerns about Pond Creek project

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Cape May Star and Wave

WEST CAPE MAY - Residents listened to an overview of the Pond Creek Salt March Restoration Project, Oct. 13, and then expressed concern about the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) project to return a freshwater meadows to its pre-1917 condition.

The plan calls for the flooding of 170 acres of the Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area with tidal water from the Delaware Bay. According to Mark Eberle with the COE, the area contained a free-flowing tidal creek until tide gates were installed in 1917. The area became a freshwater meadow that recently has become inundated with non-native phragmites, also known as the common reed. Flooding the area with salt water would kill the phragmites, which is a freshwater plant, and would restore the meadows to a saltwater marsh.

Residents such as John Schneider expressed concern that flooding the marsh with salt water would lead to nearby wells becoming salty.

"This is about water that is fit to drink," he said.

Schneider said he didn't believe the COE could alter the land without affecting the drinking water.

"What measures will the Army Corps take to protect our wells from salt water intrusion," Schneider said.

Pierre Lacombe of the U.S. Geological Survey, who was on hand to answer questions about the underground water supply system, said he could give no assurance that nearby wells would not become salted. However, he said over-development is more of a threat to the water supply. He said in an area like Reeds Beach there are homes right on the shore using wells and they are not threatened by the Delaware Bay.

"But in a dense community, where you would see scores of homes on an acre of ground, then you would have salt water intrusion," he said.

Others, such as resident Al Nicholson, believed the COE plan was going to destroy a beautiful habitat. Nicholson, who called the plan "simplistic and drastic," said "Let's not spin our wheels and go off the deep end."

Nicholson said the COE plan would mean the destruction of a fresh water habitat and would block the recovery of a cattail marsh.

Eric Shrading from the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife said a saltwater marsh would be a better natural habitat than the freshwater marsh. One of the reasons is the non-native phragmites, which have created a monoculture, pushing out other forms of vegetation. While there are perhaps two or three species of

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birds that will roost in the phragmites, a salt marsh, he said, would attract many different types of birds.

"Phragmites are a pretty poor habitat for most fish and wildlife," he said. "A salt water marsh is a much better habitat for water fowl, wading birds, shore birds and some raptors."

The phragmites, Shrading said, have little to no food value.

Ed Sokorai from the Cape May County Mosquito Control Department said the salt water marsh would also result in the introduction of mummichogs - or minnows - into the area, which are a food source for many types of wildlife, including bluefish and herons. The small fish would also eat their fair share of mosquito larvae, which would help reduce the adult mosquito population. However, David Rutherford of the Lower Township Environmental Commission said the mosquitoes would be replaced with a "plague of greenhead flies" if the area were to become a saltwater marsh.

Rutherford also said he believe the maintenance cost for a water control structure was going to be very high. Similarly, Bob Emler, also with the Lower Township Environmental Commission, asked who was going to maintain the depth of the saltwater channel. Emler also expressed concern that salt water would kill trees in the area.

"What will happen to the tree on Sassafras Island and the surrounding area?" Emler asked.

Shrading said there would actually be few trees that would be impacted by the saltwater, and the ones that were would become excellent habitat for wildlife.

The saltwater inundation plan is one of several plans considered for the eradication of phragmites in the Pond Creek area. One was to do nothing, which did nothing to solve the problem of the monoculture created by the phragmites. Another involved the spraying of chemical herbicides, which has been met with concern by environmentalists and local residents. A freshwater flooding plan would improve the freshwater marsh, but would cost $4.3 million and not meet the project goal of controlling the phragmites. The recommended alternative is one of two plans calling for saltwater tidal flooding. The recommended plan, which includes a water control structure, would cost an estimated $2.9 million, or about $900,000 less than a similar plan utilizing a dike.